



The city's vibrant, eclectic restaurant scene mixes hospitality with a passion for great food.

by Bruce Allar

A Feast for Foodies

One thing to understand about Louisvillians is that they take their food very seriously — and not in a three-squares-a-day way.

“Dining out is a thing to do in Louisville,” says restaurateur Dean Corbett. “People embrace fine dining here and their palates are educated.”

Corbett launched Equus, one of the city's top venues, 22 years ago. He added Jack's Lounge next door to it in 2000 and plans to open Corbett's in a new, outer-suburban location in late fall. He's seen the number of white-tablecloth establishments grow from a handful to 30 or more today. Some of the impetus for that expansion — and for the city's cosmopolitan tastes — can be traced, Corbett says, to the influx of food-savvy guests arriving for the Kentucky Derby, the Breeders' Cup (which regularly comes to town with the year's top horse-racing card), and professional golf events at Valhalla Golf Club — the scheduled site of the 2008 Ryder Cup. “It's like our Triple Crown,” says the

chef and owner at Equus, who regularly greets those well-traveled guests with a five- or seven-course tasting menu.

Independent restaurants thrive in Kentucky's largest city. In most cases, the owners will be in the kitchen or the front of the house every evening, assuring consistent service and quality. Though a border city, Louisville prides itself on its Southern hospitality and politeness, and the restaurants are often the city's best ambassadors. “Hospitality, I think, is different from good service,” says Susan Seiller, the proprietor at Jack Fry's, another local institution for seven decades and counting. “We come from a culture of entertaining and hosting, of really making people feel comfortable and welcome.”

The movement to local ingredients is strong in this agricultural state. It was pioneered for the dining-out scene by Kathy Cary at Lilly's and Jim Gerhardt, who helped popularize the trend while at the Seelbach Hilton's Oakroom and has taken it to a more casual setting at

Limestone in the eastern suburbs. Truck farmers make regular rounds to some restaurants, offering to chefs their best produce. Kentucky-raised specialty meats, including now-common items such as bison and rabbit, plus local artisan cheeses also find their way onto many of the better menus in town.

“You used to put a local ingredient or two on the menu and go with that,” says Equus' Corbett. “Now you can decide an entire menu and have [many] of the ingredients you need — herbs, mushrooms, vegetables, even chicken and beef” from nearby sources. The results can be interesting. Corbett, for instance, pairs Shelby County (Kentucky) corn cakes with diver scallops, while a standard at Jack Fry's is the shrimp and grits, made with corn grain from Weisenberger Mill in Midway.

“We support local farmers whenever possible, but they have to be superior quality,” says Michael Paley, the chef at Proof on Main, which opened downtown in late 2005 inside the 21c Museum Hotel. A New Jersey native who previously led kitchens in South Florida, Paley was impressed by the diversity of restaurants in Louisville, pointing to the eclectic offerings along the Bardstown Road and Frankfort Avenue corridors as well as downtown. His menu combines contemporary American dishes with Tuscan influences. Entrees such as grilled bison rib eye and porcini risotto coexist on his menu, which Paley calls “ingredient-driven, accessible, and not too fussy” — a good description for much of the city's best dining.

Having roots in Kentucky foodstuffs and homespun hospitality keeps the dining scene anchored, but chefs are allowed to color outside the lines as well. As Seiller says, “It's not about exoticism; it's about combining things in ways they've never been combined before.” Great practitioners of that art are at work in the Oakroom, where Todd Richards specializes in tantalizing tasting menus, and at 610 Magnolia, an envelope-pushing enclave operated by

Edward Lee in Old Louisville.

Also of note are a few upscale casual establishments that form the vanguard of an international-dining movement bringing creative ideas to town. Anthony Lamas, the chef and owner of Seviche, plays with peppers in such novel ways that a loyal following shows up to experiment with him on items as diverse as a Kobe beef short rib tamale or a chimichanga featuring roasted vegetables and Kenny's

Kentucky Gouda cheese. Just down Bardstown Road from Seviche, chef Peng Looi makes East meet West in stylish contemporary digs at Asiatique. His wok-seared salmon has been a must-try in town for a decade. Recently, Marcos Lorenzo at Havana Rumba has introduced landlocked Louisville to savory Cuban cuisine — and given Louisvillians a new way to eat high on the hog with *masas de puerco* and *lechon asado* — crispy-on-the-

outside pieces of marinated pork, still tender inside, and slow-roasted pork marinated in citrus juices, garlic, and Cuban spices, respectively.

All of this ferment has stimulated players in Louisville kitchens without creating much competitive sniping. The result: Chefs and restaurateurs believe they are part of something special. As Corbett says, "For our size, this is the greatest food town in America — I'm not blowin' smoke."

Grateful Greens
co-owner Greg Graft



BEYOND FRESH

Some of Louisville's best-known chefs get their ingredients locally from a hydroponic greenhouse business, Grateful Greens.

Since its first harvest in December 2000, the 8,500-square-foot greenhouse supplies lettuces, herbs, and edible flowers to area restaurants and food markets. Grown in water and rock wool — a very porous molten rock that holds water and maintains a neutral pH ideal for seed germination — plants can be harvested with a small piece of the rock wool intact, so it's "still a living plant when it's pulled and packed away," says Greg Graft, co-owner and general manager. Living plants have "a tremendously long shelf-life."

"The quality is just over the top," says Michael Paley, Proof On Main executive chef. "It's impossible to get anything fresher," says Shawn Ward, executive chef at Jack Fry's.

Graft himself was a chef for roughly ten years, an experience that affords him a certain insight. "He knows what a chef wants and thinks," says Daniel Stage, executive chef at Le Relais.

Restaurant goers can sample Grateful Greens' lettuces by ordering Le Relais' Red Oak Salad served with goat cheese and toasted hazelnuts, Proof's Grateful Greens Salad served with pecorino and red wine vinaigrette, Jack Fry's Warm Brie Salad served on Bibb lettuce with toasted almonds, and other selections at these and more Louisville restaurants. — *Susan E. Stegemann*

LOCAL FLAVORS

Facing increased competition from national chains, whose heavily marketed dinner-house concepts have begun to more closely mimic independent operations, Louisville's restaurant community banded together in early 2005 to form the Louisville Originals.

"We felt there was a need to level the playing field," says co-founder Andrew Hutto, who owns Baxter Station Bar and Grill in the Irish Hill neighborhood.

Now 60 member-restaurants strong, the Originals (louisvilleoriginals.com) are part of a 16-city movement, DineOriginals.com, promoting the uniqueness of locally owned eateries and the value of keeping dining dollars closer to home. The Louisville chapter pools resources for its own marketing purposes and flies its banner at public events.

Chain restaurants — with their middle-of-the-road offerings — hit Louisville's outer suburbs, but the city's downtown and eastern uptown neighborhoods retain their charm and character. Owner-operators proliferate in these areas, and dining at these independent restaurants, says Hutto, is a hands-on rather than a buzzer-in-hand experience. Louisville Originals members aim to keep it that way. — *BA*

IF YOU GO

610 Magnolia

610 Magnolia St.
502-636-0783

Asiatique

1767 Bardstown Rd.
502-451-2749

Baxter Station Bar and Grill

1201 Payne St.
502-584-1635

The English Grill (Brown Hotel)

335 West Broadway
502-583-1234

Equus

122 Sears Ave., Saint Matthews, KY
502-897-9721

Havana Rumba

4115 Oechsli Ave.
502-897-1959

Jack Fry's

1007 Bardstown Rd.
502-452-9244

Jack's Lounge

122 Sears Ave., Saint Matthews, KY
502-897-9721

Le Relais

2817 Taylorsville Rd.
502-451-9020

Lilly's

1147 Bardstown Rd.
502-451-0447

Limestone

10001 Forest Green Blvd.
502-426-7477

Lynn's Paradise Cafe

984 Barret Ave.
502-648-7771

The Oakroom (Seelbach Hilton)

500 Fourth St.
502-807-3463

Proof on Main (21c Museum Hotel)

702 W. Main St.
502-217-6360

Seviche

1538 Bardstown Rd.
502-473-8560



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